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ABSTRACT

The United States Air Force is unique among the armed services in placing all its professional military education (PME) and professional continuing education (PCE) under a single command. Furthermore, most of the schools and courses are in the same geographical location at the Maxwell/Gunter complex in Montgomery, Alabama. There are basic differences among the services in their education programs, but all of the services put a value on good communication skills for officer, enlisted, and civilian personnel. For the Air Force, the emphasis on communication skills is especially evident in PME. For enlisted personnel, the program is four-tiered: at the Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) Preparatory Course, 35 of the 60 hours focus on leadership, management, and communication skills; 25 hours out of the 143-hour course at the NCO Leadership School curriculum focus directly on communication skills; 33 hours out of a 216-hour course at the NCO Academies are spent in communication skills; and at the Senior NCO Academy, 39 of the 320 total hours in the course are devoted exclusively to communication skills. Similar dedication to communication skills is given in the three-tiered approach used for officers. The military believes that the ability to communicate effectively is so important that no one ever gets past the place in life where there is no need to sharpen these skills. (HOD)

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COMMUNICATION THEORY AND RESEARCH IN AIR FORCE EDUCATION AND TRAINING

A paper presented to SCA, Denver CO 7-10 Nov 85

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When I left the University of Missouri-Columbia over ten years ago to become the Dean of Communication with the USAF Air University, I knew I would enter a world where practical application of communication theory and research would be important. I did not fully realize how important. I was soon impressed that for the Air Force the value of theory and research is measured by its success in practice.

Six years later I became the Chief Academic Official of Air University where I report directly to a three-star commanding general who is the Chief Executive Officer. Air University (AU) is on the same organizational level as the Tactical Air Command (TAC) or the Air Force Logistics Command (AFLC) reporting directly to the Air Force Chief of Staff. Air University is obviously much smaller both in size and budget than these commands and our mission is very specific--to provide professional military and continuing education for selected officers, enlisted personnel, and Air Force civilians.

This task is accomplished through many courses conducted at various Air University schools and colleges and through placing USAF personnel in programs at major civilian universities. The Air War College, Air Command and Staff College, Squadron Officer School, Air Force Institute of Technology, Senior Noncommissioned Officer Academy, and some fifty other courses and schools comprise AU. In addition the AU Extension Course Institute has over 300,000 students from all services enrolled in nonresident courses. While most AU programs do not lead to degrees, Masters and PhD degrees are offered in selected programs.

Training courses in the Air Force do not fall under AU, but are developed and taught through the Air Training Command (ATC). However, the AU Extension Course Institute does provide administration and distribution services for nonresident training courses, and both AU and ATC work closely with the Air Force Director of Personnel to provide quality education and training programs.

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The Air Force is unique among the services in placing all its Professional Military Education (PME) and Professional Continuing Education (PCE) under a single command. Furthermore, most of the schools and courses are in the same geographical location at the Maxwell/Gunter complex in Montgomery, Alabama.

There are basic differences among the services in their education programs, but all of the services put a value on good communication skills for officer, enlisted, and civilian personnel. For the Air Force, the emphasis on communication skills is especially evident in PME.

The Air Force has structured PME programs for both officer and enlisted personnel. For enlisted personnel, the program is four-tiered.

1. The Noncommissioned Officer Preparatory Course (NCOPC) is designed to broaden the followership and leadership skills of airmen first class and senior airmen (at about the 2-year point) and groom them for their future duties and responsibilities as Air Force noncommissioned officers. Thirty-five of the 60 hours focus on leadership, management, and communication skills.

2. The NCO Leadership School (NCOLS) curriculum is designed to broaden the leadership and management skills of selected junior NCOS, generally at the staff sergeant rank. In this 143-hour course, 40 hours are devoted to leadership and management, while 25 hours focus directly on communication skills.

3. The NCO Academies (NCOAs) are located in every major air command and are designed to prepare selected NCOS, usually at the technical sergeant rank, for more advanced leadership and management responsibilities within their specific commands. The curriculum, however, is standardized by regulation for all academies. This 216-hour course includes 65 hours in leadership and management, and 33 hours in communication skills.

4. The Senior NCO Academy (SNCOA) for the entire Air Force is located at Air University. Here, 250 top Senior NCOS--senior and chief master sergeants, or master sergeants who have been selected for senior rank--attend an 8-week course to become more effective leaders and managers during peacetime, time of crisis, and conflict. There are five classes held each year. Of the 320 total hours in the course, 111 are devoted to leadership and management and 39 are devoted exclusively to communication skills. In addition, a student may elect to take 32 additional elective hours in communication skills.

Professional Military Education for officers follows a three-tiered approach. All officers, of course, are college graduates; many have graduate degrees. All have had standard college courses in writing and speaking so that communication skills taught in the Air University three-tiered system build upon that previous education and training.

1. The Squadron Officer School (SOS) conducts five 9-week classes each year, each for 800 first lieutenants and junior captains. The purpose of the course is to prepare young officers to employ forces and develop their abilities to lead and to communicate. The 284 curriculum hours include 111 in leadership, 26 in the closely allied topic of officership, and 55 in communication skills.

2. The Air Command and Staff College (ACSC) is designed so that 560 intermediate officers (majors) can enhance their professional knowledge, skills and perspectives so as to assume increased leadership roles in command and staff positions. The academic year includes over 1000 hours; 135 are in the area of command, leadership, and resource management; another 70 are in staff communications and research.

3. The Air War College (AWC) is attended by 240 officers each year. Its mission is to prepare highly selected officers (less than 5% of all eligibles) for key staff and command assignments where they will be responsible for developing, managing, and employing air power as a component of national security. Of the slighty over 800 curriculum hours, 133 are devoted to leadership and management. No hours are devoted strictly to communication skills, although students may elect to take from 20-40 hours in writing and speaking.

In the seven PME courses, emphasis on communication skills is not fully reflected in the hours so designated. At all levels of PME, NCOs, officers, and equivalent grade civilians attending the courses must complete various types of written and spoken assignments. For example, at the SNCOA and SOS, students must make several written and spoken presentations. At ACSC and AWC, students must submit a substantial research paper and make several oral presentations. Furthermore, most of the courses--such as the comptrollers course, the academic instructors course, chaplains courses, judge advocate general courses, and various personnel courses, just to name a few--communication skills instruction plays a vital role.

To insure the effective meshing of communication skills taught in the various courses, Air University has a Planning Advisory Group (PAG) with representatives from each school or course. This group meets regularly to enhance the level of communication skills taught at Air University and provides guidance for communication skills instruction throughout the Air Force.

The sister services have an education structure similar to the Air Force. And they also share the concern for communication skills. The military believes that the ability to communicate effectively is so important that no one ever gets past the place in life where there is no need to sharpen the skills.

Since leaving the university setting over ten years ago my perspective on the role of communication research and theory has changed. While I would not argue against the role of basic research--indeed I would support its value--I believe irrelevant, impractical, useless research is often passed off with the claim that it is basic research rather than applied research. Both the military and corporate sectors would like to see communication researchers and theorists make stronger attempts to relate their findings to practice, and then do what their title suggests--communicate that relationship to the user.

Both from my perspective as an educator and trainer for the Air Force and from my wide experience in conducting management and communication skills education and training for the corporate sector, I offer the following probe statements for this panel and the audience members here today.

1. Communication skills need to be taught throughout the education process; not merely at elementary, secondary, or beginning college levels.

2. Communication professionals do an inadequate job of relating theory and research to the practical work-a-day world.

3. The Speech Communication discipline has in many instances gotten too far away from a skills orientation.

4. Academic departments can no longer be proactive and tell what should be taught. To survive they must become reactive and teach what needs to be taught.

5. Academians must do more than write for each other.